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Scale How, Ambleside, UK, 2009

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## BACKWARD BOYS.

BY C. E. EGAN, B.A., TUTOR.

A BACKWARD boy is one who, notwithstanding the usual educational advantages, has contrived to learn less than the average boy of his age. Many reasons have been assigned for the existence of the backward boy. Heredity (which includes, of course, constitutional indolence), slowness of mental development, and the natural tendency of teachers to pay special attention to their more intelligent pupils, are all contributory causes to the production of the backward boy. A form-master has given an admirably lucid explanation of a difficult problem. Looking at the boys, his glance is met by a few bright faces full of intelligence, while the dull expression and lack-lustre eye which characterize the hoi polloi bring forcibly to the poor master's mind the text,—“Cast not thy pearls before swine.” Is it astonishing that the master, a man, perhaps, of highly strung nervous temperament, addresses himself to the appreciative and quick-witted, and treats the blank-faced ones as hopeless dullards? Yet it is among these latter that the true teacher will discern the real field of his labour. Here, and among these dullards, must he invest the richest pearls of his teaching,—for Bright-eyes can see with very little assistance,—it is poor Want-wit whose mental vision needs all possible illumination. Here, however, the scholarship system steps in, and ordains that Brighteyes shall receive special attention, that the pace, in fact, shall be set by that of the quickest horse, and that poor Lack-lustre must remain in his ignorance.

This system seems to me both unjust and impolitic. It is unjust, for the parents of the dullard contribute as much to the School funds as the parents of the scholarship boy. It is also impolitic, for the school-hero does not invariably become

a world-hero; on the contrary, many of our greatest geniuses have come from the ranks of the apparently dull. It is with minds as with flowers; some reach their full bloom early, others are of tardier and hardier growth.

The scholarship boy has often done his best life-work in taking his scholarship, and thenceforth sinks into a limp and uninteresting pedant; while the mind of the so-called dullard is but undergoing its preliminary stages at School and College, and reserves its full vigour for the stern problems of actual life. How mortifying to a master to reflect that a man, with whose name all England is now ringing, had been, when a boy, relegated by him to the dullard brigade!

To what extent heredity is responsible for the existence of the true dullard would be, perhaps, far to seek. One thing is certain, that if a somewhat soft-headed young man marry a maiden fair and frivolous, he cannot reasonably expect his son to be a genius. I allow, of course, for instances of “*lusus naturæ*.” It has been alleged against the heredity principle that many men of undoubted intellect have had dullard sons; but this argument merely strengthens the case for heredity. In these high-pressure times, the desperate battle of life subjects the minds of men of “light and leading” to so terrible a strain, that the wearied and overworked brain of the father is often reflected in the incapacity of the son.

The practical question now arises, what should be the attitude of the true teacher towards the dullard.

Has the last word been spoken, when we dismiss the dense one as a hopeless case, as a being utterly devoid of the finer faculties, as a mere animal with appetites, and only to be reached through those appetites?

I have no words strong enough to express my dissent from this detestable doctrine. We have here a fellow-mortal, of the genus *Homo*, but somewhat deficient, through no fault of his own, in those nobler mental attributes, the exercise of which constitutes much of the charm of life.

The heart of the true teacher should go out to such, with the resolve to employ whatever of teaching skill, whatever of psychic or mental force he possesses, in developing into fuller and freer growth those germs and embryos of intellectual power which undoubtedly exist in the mind of his pupil. The work is hard, but the reward is great. How often have

I seen the eyes of even backward boys flash with interest and intelligence when a master, quitting the drier details of History, has given a vivid description of the fighting at Cannæ or Waterloo; of the stern Roman, battling hard against wild Sirocco and wilder Numidian, or of the British squares that held their own against the terrible Cuirassiers!

In the rye-fields red and gory,  
Dying in undying glory!

Again, how encouraging to watch the interest deepen in the faces of boys who love animals or sport, as they listen to a stirring account of the fauna of foreign lands!

The first thing is to find out the boy's penchant or hobby, and taking that as a starting point, allure him gently to other fields of intellectual interest. Acting thus, the skilled teacher may not only strengthen an unpromising foundation, but build thereon a sound and solid superstructure of useful knowledge.

A teacher should be able to place facts before a boy in the parlance of his favourite athletic game. How often have important facts been fixed for ever in the memory, by an apt allusion to the sports of the fencing room or cricket field!

My own experience, as tutor, has lain chiefly among the previously ploughed, and these are admittedly "difficult subjects," if only on the principle that "History repeats itself." But by first making a close study of the pupil's character, and then dishing up the required knowledge in the form most palatable to *him*, I have almost invariably converted the previous failure into a success. And here I would caution parents against a habit which is, I fear, far too prevalent. Parents, who are themselves intelligent, are prone to lose patience with their apparently denser offspring, and apply to them opprobrious epithets, such as "stupid," &c.

Avoid this habit as you would the plague. The child *believes* you, looks on himself as a dolt, and contracts what may prove a life-long aversion to mental exertion of any kind. Moreover, your condemnation may be utterly unjust, for your child's mind may be of slow growth, and may ultimately develope into a far more powerful one than your own. It has been one of my greatest difficulties to reinstate, in his own good opinion, a pupil whom well-meaning

relatives had conspired to imbue with the notion, that whatever else was doubtful, *he* at least was an imbecile, and that it was a case of "Love's labour lost" for him to try to pass any examination. Let us not forget the terrible judgment pronounced upon the man who shall say to his brother, "Thou fool!"

In some cases, the so-called backward boy, is really a bashful, timid boy, who has pushed, to a fault, the charming diffidence of youth. Boys of this stamp must be encouraged, drawn out, coaxed into letting fall the visor of the mind, and giving fair play to what may prove an "esprit de choix." A teacher should, in fact, be a human sun, warming, gladdening, cheering, and quickening into full life and beauty, all mental germs within the sphere of his influence. O Pedant, who in life "froze the genial current of the soul" in the little ones entrusted to thee, how canst thou rest in thine unhonoured grave!

To sum up—the number of backward boys would be considerably diminished, if mothers undertook the mental training of their own younger children, instead of handing them over to "bonnes" and nursery governesses; if teachers were less prone to visit, upon the brain-power of their pupils, the blame really chargeable against their own want of skill in teaching; if form-masters set the pace by that of the slowest horse, and thought nothing thoroughly explained, until it had been grasped by the densest boy in the form; and lastly, if care were taken in the home to preserve a boy from the depressing influence of an atmosphere of disapproval.

The training, during childhood, is the key of the position. Skilfully, tenderly, lovingly, must it be done, and therefore by the mother herself. O ye mothers! where can ye buy love? Who, like the mother, can welcome all signs of budding intelligence, and who, but the mother, can save the *amour propre* of the child, when confronted by some infantile "pons asinorum?"

If it be true that the boy is the father of the man, it is equally true that the child is the father of the boy.

The Spartans justified the gladiatorial training of their women by the saying, "It is only women who can be the mothers of men." The Spartan ideal of manhood was purely physical. We have raised the standard, and to the physical

have superadded the mental and moral. The adaptation of the Spartan system to modern conditions would involve the physical, mental and moral training of the future mothers of the race, and the trend of the female education of to-day is strongly in this direction.

In the hands of such mothers, the training of childhood will be safe.

Being thoroughly convinced that our human nature is ever struggling upward to higher planes of existence, I venture to indulge in the hope that as a result of general action on the lines indicated, the backward boy of the future will be indeed a "rara avis."

## THE RELIGIOUS TRAINING OF CHILDREN.

[The substance—abbreviated throughout—of an Address delivered at a meeting of the Eastbourne Branch of the P.N.E.U., by the Rev. H. BICKERSTETH OTTLEY, Vicar of Eastbourne, on the 23rd of February, 1894.]

"SUFFER the little children to come unto Me." That, I need not remind you, is the warrant for our work in the Parents' Educational Union. It is our warrant, and it is enough. We *must* bring our little ones to Him. Blunder as we may, it must be attempted—nay, it must be done—this great, this glorious, but in some respects most difficult duty—the enfolding of our children at the Heart, yes, in the very Life, of CHRIST. But *how* is this to be done? and especially at the present time? Never, surely, in the world's history has "the time" been more opportune; never has the need been more clearly recognised than it is to-day. Everywhere—by every thinking man and woman—the void is felt which, assuredly, only the CHRIST can fill. The age is brimming over with its new ideals: the new learning, like Ithuriel's spear, is touching with its point of flame all the hopes and fears of the world.

There are no mysteries, no secrets left; we all know everything, or at any rate something about everything under the sun—so we all suppose. What with the help of our newspapers, our telegraphs, our photography, and our steam, there are no more worlds left for us to conquer! Sarcasm apart, let us look at the facts. Here, at home, the old order changing, democratic principles gaining ground, restlessness, unsettlement, from apex to base of the social pyramid; parents asking to be relieved of their parental responsibilities, expecting that either the Church or the State, or the School Board, or the schoolmaster, shall practically take entire charge, body and soul, of the children they have brought into the world. At the very core of our Public Educational system we are met with a frank disavowal in certain quarters of what has passed for Christian teaching